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# POLITICS, CARE AND UNCERTAINTY IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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• HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN •

## ABSTRACT

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Losing its closest socialist ally, the Soviet Union, launched Cuba into a severe economic and political crisis that forced the state to make several concessions to its earlier ideals. State services and contributions to the population were severely cut, the country was opened to international tourism and day-to-day life became increasingly monetised, favouring some whilst marginalising others. Expectations of the crisis were that it would create widespread popular resistance to the state. Drawing on ethnographic evidence from contemporary Havana, this report explores how individuals relate to Cuba's current state discourse in the context of the island's recent political and economic transformations. The dynamics between large-scale developments and individuals' everyday lives is approached through the notion of dialectics of care, which highlights the multifaceted relationships that people maintain with state institutions, whilst simultaneously finding inventive ways to negotiate the continuing political and economic precarity.

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Keywords: Cuba, socialism, post-socialism, politics, care, uncertainty, state power, economic crisis, paternalism

In the low-income neighbourhood in Havana where I conducted fieldwork in 2008,<sup>1</sup> Vladimir, a man in his forties, turned in Thalia, a pretty girl in her late teens, to the police for *jineteo*. In contemporary Cuba, where tourism has become the life line of a socialist government struggling with economic problems, *jineteo* is an illegal activity that refers to all kinds of tourist hustling ranging from sex work to unlicensed cigar sales (see Allen 2011; Stout 2014; Simoni forthcoming). Due to Vladimir's actions, Thalia got a mark on her criminal record, making it more difficult for her to obtain, for instance, access to higher education and many jobs. Moreover, Vladimir went more public than normal with his complaints; he participated in a television show where people can call and point out problems in their community. Afterwards, Caridad, an elderly woman living in the neighbourhood, told me that people had commented on the issue to her husband who was previously the President of the local CDR, the Committee for the Defence of Revolution:

A [lady] who lives around there [close by] said to Miguel [Caridad's husband] that how come we let him [Vladimir] speak about that on TV, that he was in this program where people can call and tell their problems and he talked *tremenda mierda* [tremendous crap], speaking badly of the neighbourhood; that how come we let him do that. It is true that Thalia was *jineteando* but still...

Caridad's husband's position as the former President of his local CDR plays a crucial role in this story. The CDRs were founded in 1960 as the instrument of revolutionary social control that is supposed to stop people from perpetrating illicit activities. Even though currently much weakened compared with the earlier decades of the revolution, the CDRs still operated when I last visited Havana in 2010. As in the case of Thalia, nowadays such illicit activities often relate to ways of making money by engaging in activities sanctioned by the state, such as tourist hustling. The CDRs play their part in state attempts to install egalitarian policy at the grass-roots level by controlling illicit forms of accumulating wealth. The CDRs have also been a crucial link in the state redistribution system, another way through which the Cuban government has tried to install the ideology of socialist egalitarianism in practice. For instance, when the government decided to replace the fridges in the entire country with models that save electricity, they turned to the CDRs to implement this process in practice. CDRs thereby participate not only in state surveillance, but also in nurture.

In their claims for legitimacy, socialist states have traditionally relied on the notion of providing individuals with nurture from cradle to grave. This aspect of socialist governance has usually been approached through the notion of state paternalism that has become standard vocabulary in research on socialism and post-socialism (e.g. Verdery 1996: 24–25, 63–64, 69; Gal & Kligman 2000a: 5, 2000b: 5, 87; Kath 2006, 2010; Andaya 2007: 63, 82). Katherine Verdery (1996: 63) defines socialist paternalism as 'a quasi-familial dependency' that posits 'a moral tie linking subjects to the state through their rights to a share in the redistributed social product' and argues that this cultivates dependency rather than agency or social solidarity.

However, I find the concept of paternalism problematic. This was not the way in which my Cuban friends conceptualised their relationship with the state. This type of thinking is also problematic due to the basic assumptions involved in the Anglo-American liberalist political tradition (Sahlins 1996). The idea of state paternalism plays on a notion of individuals as being against the state: that the essence of the state is built on coercive power. Verdery (1996: 20) sees socialist states as comparatively weak and constantly undermined by internal resistance and hidden forms of sabotage at all system levels. Nevertheless, power is always a culturally and historically mediated relationship (Sahlins 2004): what constitutes power is culturally organised and experienced and changes over time.

I suggest that in contemporary Cuba, the notion of *dialectics of care* (Härkönen 2014, forthcoming) provides a more fertile way to examine the interaction between the state and individuals. My research participants' everyday life focused on gendered exchanges of nurturing, material and emotional care as way to create, maintain and negotiate relationships. Women were expected to provide nurture and men to reciprocate with material contributions. I use the term *dialectics* to convey the idea that caring practices shift over time, that care may materialise at a certain moment yet disappear at another, and that it may flow in a certain direction in a specific context and alter its direction in another context.

The state participates in the dialectics of care through such services as health care and the redistributive system. By emphasising the contributions the state manages or fails to make to those in need, it becomes conceptualised as a social actor in the dialectics of care. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the state has had serious problems in fulfilling its

role as a nurturer and redistributor. The economic crisis that Cuba encountered after the fall of the Soviet Union has forced the state to make several concessions to the socialist ideology, such as allowing the formation of small private enterprises and opening the country to international tourism (Eckstein 1994; Azicri 2000). The 1990s also witnessed the growing monetisation of Cuban society (Eckstein 1994). More material items became available to Cubans solely through monetary exchange as opposed to the previous system of receiving them as state subsidies.

The material deficiencies of the post-Soviet period have intensified Cubans' desires to emigrate. People also experience heightened desires for consumption, as state shops now occasionally feature DVD players and Nike trainers (Porter 2008). At the same time, state investment in tourism has brought to the island significant numbers of foreigners attractive in their ability to provide answers to diverse longings. Inequalities have intensified when some are inventive enough to reap the benefits of the new forms of income, making up to 500 USD per month, while others struggle to make ends meet on a state wage of 20 USD per month. These post-Soviet era changes have undermined the traditional idea of socialist egalitarianism and the redistribution system as the source of state legitimacy. When Fidel Castro became ill in 2006, many expected the government to fall and several researchers now refer to Cuba with the term 'late-socialist' (e.g. Hernandez-Reguant 2004; Hill 2007), suggesting that the island is on an inevitable evolutionist trajectory towards liberal capitalism. However, despite the numerous economic and political troubles of the post-Soviet period, nearly all my research participants continued to support the Cuban mode of socialism, especially valuing the free health care that gave them a feeling of safety in the midst of turmoil.

Indeed, the country's economic and political precarity since the 1990s racks everyday life with uncertainty and struggle for survival. Despite noble ideals of state nurture, the practical execution of state activities frequently encounters obstacles. The lack of resources, decent wages and employee motivation, as well as complicated bureaucratic regulations, undermine the notion of the state as a provider of care to its citizens and, consequently, the desire of Cubans to rely on state services. Nevertheless, people did not wish for less state involvement as such, as suggested by the discussion on socialist paternalism but, rather, more and better state contributions.

All kinds of cancellations and material deficiencies in state contributions undermine the trust and sympathy that many poorer people still feel towards the state in taking care of their needs. In practice, a large part of the material and nurturing care that used to be provided by the state in the Soviet era (cf. Rosendahl 1997) now comes to Cubans from their kin and partners. Women and children place intensified expectations of material care on men, whilst beauty is increasingly emphasised for women as an important means of creating materially advantageous relationships with wealthy partners. This situation represents a clear shift away from the service-providing socialist state.

Yet the power of this tendency to lead to a more heavy criticism of the state may be counteracted by the fact that my research participants often attributed their everyday annoyances more to the individual actors with whom they were dealing than to the entire state system as such. Cuba's state-level economic difficulties are experienced through intensified quarrels at the grassroots level of everyday life amongst people who over the years of steadier state socialism grew accustomed to expecting an equal sharing of scarce

resources. Heightened inequalities cause many to feel angry, envious and marginalised when the young, beautiful and well-connected are better prepared to get ahead in life.

Officially, the CDR should act as a levelling mechanism in the neighbourhood in the sense that it should ensure that people are not making money through illegal ventures. Nevertheless, many Cubans turn up at events organised by the CDR in order to give the impression of being good revolutionaries, and therefore able to continue their unlicensed activities in peace. One man even became the President of his local CDR so that he could better continue renting rooms to foreigners in his flat without a state license.

In this case, as in the incident involving Thalia and Vladimir, the meaning of the CDR—ostensibly and officially the instrument of revolutionary social control—changes for many to something different. To return to Caridad's statement, in her neighbour's view, the local CDR should have interfered and stopped Vladimir from divulging neighbourhood secrets in public. That is, the CDR should have exerted social control in order to protect the interests of the *neighbours* instead of the revolution. This shows that Cubans may re-interpret the tasks of the socialist institutions, aiming to use them for their own advantage instead of that of the state. In the case of Thalia and Vladimir, many of the neighbours thought that they should care for each other as a community when the state fails to deliver its promises. Vladimir was perceived as acting selfishly in his attempt to raise his own social position in relation to the official revolutionary discourse and in trying to harm those neighbours who enjoyed some of the newer, more globalised and tourism-related forms of material advantages to which he did not have access. He ended up socially isolated in the neighbourhood.

While socialist states are characterised by a strongly concentrated system of power that extends to the grassroots level through such mediating institutions as the CDR, this does not prevent the possibility of the message changing in this process of mediation, and the social solidarity traditionally emphasised in the state discourse being reinterpreted, gaining new meanings and even turning against the state on occasion. While people in socialist societies are often seen as somewhat dominated by the 'evil' state by force (cf. Yurchak 2006: 4-8), my ethnography shows that ordinary people have the means to exert agency in their local communities, whether by trying to use state apparatuses for their own purposes or, at times, simply by ignoring the state discourse. No power structure is so dominant that it defines a person's entire being without leaving room for human agency, contingency and alternative outcomes.

The notion of state paternalism is misleading because it suggests a rejection of state participation in people's lives on the part of individuals, and this is not the case with many Cubans. Rather, my research participants conceptualised the state as playing a part in a dynamics of shifting allegiances, as an actor that in some issues was on their side, but not in others. The notion of dialectics of care catches the temporally shifting nature of caring practices between the state and other actors.

Post-Soviet Cuba's large-scale political and economic uncertainties are experienced by individuals as intensified inequalities and expectations of care in their social relations. When state care fails, people turn to other sources for support: the post-Soviet era changes favour the young, pretty and inventive. In the process, they may sometimes even transform the institutions that should bring centralised state power to the grassroots level. At the same time, Cuba's large-scale changes create new marginalisations. The ways

in which *Habaneros* (Residents of Havana) negotiate post-Soviet uncertainties through emphasising varying notions of solidarity and gendered care amongst kin, lovers and neighbours, highlight the complexity of the relationships that people maintain with state institutions, as they simultaneously cope in a creative way with Cuba's continuing political and economic precarity.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> My research draws on altogether 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Havana between 2003 and 2010 (the majority of which took place in 2007–2008) amongst low-income, racially mixed Cubans. All the names of my research participants have been changed. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences Inter-Congress 2014 and the 50th Anniversary Conference of The Japanese Society of Cultural Anthropology in Chiba, Japan.

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